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## WELCOME TO *DO NOT BE AFRAID: AN ILLUSTRATED DEVOTIONAL*

Our Illustrated Devotionals are meant to be colored in and doodled/drawn on. You will see opportunities to color, doodle, draw, and respond to prompts throughout the devotional. We invite you to allow the illustrations and spaces for creativity to draw you deeper into reflection.

The inspiration for our theme comes from the angels' message in the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke: **"Do not be afraid!"** This phrase is an instruction God gave to God's people throughout their history, and it's a message God continues to give to us today. This Advent, we invite you to explore what it looks like to hold hope when life feels really uncertain, to bring peace in the face of fear, to practice joy when everything seems burdensome, and to choose love, when sometimes, it's just really hard. You'll be invited to wonder more deeply about this classic story, to imagine some of the details that aren't filled in for us, and to make connections to your context this season.

We encourage you to explore how these ideas and themes influence how you view God, your faith, and the world. This Advent devotional is written to be used individually or with a group, intergenerationally, or with youth groups or adult studies.

So grab a pen, some crayons or colored pencils, and start working through the devotional.

As you use these resources, we would love to hear what was helpful and meaningful, as well as any suggestions and comments you have for improvement. Your feedback helps us continue to create quality faith formation materials. You can reach us at [info@illustratedministry.com](mailto:info@illustratedministry.com) or find us on the following social networks:

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Our Facebook Group is a growing community of our customers and friends. If you're looking for ideas and suggestions for using this resource or any other product suggestions, request to join here:

**[fb.com/groups/illustratedmin](https://fb.com/groups/illustratedmin)**

We also love to see photos and hear stories about how you are using our products. When you post photos or comments online, please use the hashtag [#illustratedmin](https://twitter.com/illustratedmin) or tag us in the photos so we can see them. That allows us to be part of the conversation and you to be part of our online community. Additionally, checking the hashtag on social media is a great way to see how other families and churches are creatively using our resources.

Peace be with you!

The Illustrated Ministry Team





## BEST PRACTICES FOR SHARING ILLUSTRATED MINISTRY'S RESOURCES

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If you purchased this product by selecting *Ministry Use (Church Size: ### members)*, we've found that there are three good ways to share our files with your community.

**Email:** Depending on the size of your congregation, we encourage you to email files to those who want to use the resource. Another option is to put an announcement in your bulletin, asking those interested in receiving the files to email the person with access to the resource.

*Note: Please do not include attachments or links to download our files in any emails/newsletters that are posted publicly online with services like Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc. Links of this nature are searchable by Google, and the files become accessible to the general public.*

**Posting Online:** We generally discourage posting our files online because they become accessible through Google searches. We do not want the general public to have access to our products free of charge. One option is to put the files on a password-protected page of your website, or use a private Facebook Group. Please remember to take the files down after you've finished using them.

*Note: Please do not include the password in a bulletin or newsletter that is posted publicly online.*

**Print:** Most congregations who purchase our digital files choose to print out the materials. Printing the materials is probably the easiest way to share the resources with your community.

Thanks for understanding, and we appreciate your support!

The Illustrated Ministry Team



# TO HOLD HOPE

## LUKE 1:26-45

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the

child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

My kid met his teacher via a Zoom call this year, two days before “distance learning” started. He was at our kitchen table, she was in her teaching space—her background a white wall with yellow splashes, a growth mindset chart, and a bunch of hand-drawn sunflowers bordering the mantra:

“WE ARE NOT AFRAID  
OF CHALLENGES.”



She asked him about his summer, about what he was reading, and about his brother, who’d been in her class two years ago. Standard questions, to which my kid gave his standard reply of a shrug, a nod, or a single pleasant-but-fairly-nondescript word.

She was **PATIENT**, but I could tell she wanted more engagement from him.

Then she asked, “What do you **hope** to learn about this year?”

He paused, sitting up straighter. He said, ever-so-softly, “Math?”

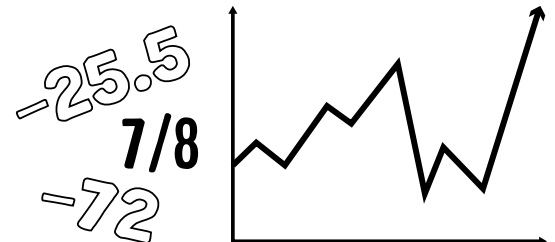
She nodded encouragingly. “What kind of math?”

He wasn’t sure of the options. She supplied some: “Decimals? Negative numbers? Graphing?”

“Negative numbers,” he said with a little more volume.

“Alright,” she said, “We’ll be working a lot with those.”

He grinned. He’d not been looking forward to school starting. This moment began to **CHANGE** things for him, giving him



**SOMETHING TO ANTICIPATE.**

As the weeks since that call have passed, I’ve continued to appreciate how that teacher **HELD OUT HOPE** for my kid. How she invited him to name something he was curious about, something he didn’t yet know, and promised they’d explore it together.



Some days it can feel like everything we know is difficult. We know we've been deeply affected by a virus that spreads rapidly and particularly attacks those most vulnerable, though no one is immune.

We know there is sickness in our systems, too—racism, sexism, heterosexism, and nationalism that poison each of us and our effort to live

together. We know our climate revolts against our abuse of it, fights back with raging fire, flooding water, and devastating winds. We know there is so much at risk at this moment.

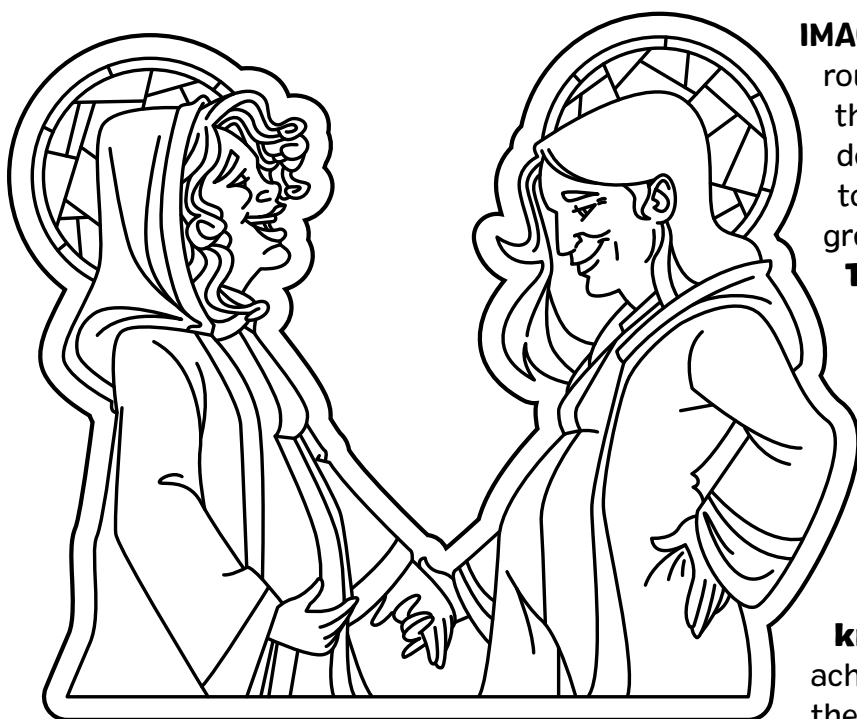
**When the weight of all that we know is bearing down on us, it makes sense that we feel overwhelmed. Angry. Scared.**

## But what don't we know?

**We don't know** what the lasting effects of all the energy and love poured out will be. **We don't know** how our efforts to care for each other creatively will continue even after we've returned to old routines. **We don't know** how all the energy in the streets, all the learning done online, all the art created in response to the heartbreak and loss might form building blocks of the kingdom we sing and pray for.



## THERE IS SO MUCH HOPE IN WHAT WE DO NOT YET KNOW.



**IMAGINE MARY AND ELIZABETH**, bellies round and rounder, babies leaping inside them. Imagine all that those women do not know: **They don't know** what to think of that angel who brought greetings and a message of God's favor. **They don't know** why they've been chosen for these roles. **They don't know** who their babies will become, though they have some hints. **They don't know** how being mothers will change them. **They don't know** how their children will change the world or how the world will change their children. **They don't know** how their hearts will expand, ache, swell, and break for the children they carry now.

**They don't know** whether their community will rally around them or run them out of town when they see this older woman and this young girl, both heavy with the hopes and dreams of their people, neither exactly who people would've expected, perhaps, to play these parts.

**They also might not know** where they'll put another body, or how they'll feed another mouth, or if they'll ever get a full night's sleep again. **They might not know** how contagious their babies' giggles will be, how sweet their tiny toes will seem, how thrilled they'll be to hear their first words.

But they know each other. They are **EXCITED** for each other. They know that somewhere, *wrapped in all this unknown*, is an extraordinary gift. In their confusion and anticipation, they find each other, and they bless each other for what's to come.

All they have is an **invitation** to their life, ever-changing as they live each day, and an **instruction** to not be afraid. All they know is that's the same instruction God has given God's people all throughout their history:

## “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

Perhaps this Advent, the weight of all that we know is bearing down on us. And perhaps God gives to us this year the same gifts Mary and Elizabeth received so long ago: an **invitation**, an **instruction**, and the **hope held** in all we do not yet know.



USE THIS SPACE TO REFLECT ON, AND WRITE ABOUT, THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE WHO HOLD HOPE FOR YOU. ALSO, WHO DO YOU HOLD HOPE FOR?

# QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*What's something you'd like to learn more about?*

*What's your favorite way to learn about something new?*

# GOING DEEPER

*Who do you go to when you have something important to share, like how Mary went to Elizabeth?*

*Have you ever taken on a new role without knowing much about it? How did that feel? What did you worry about? What did you hope for?*

*In what area of your life do you need to hear the invitation not to be afraid right now?*

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# TO BRING PEACE

## LUKE 1:46-55

And Mary said,

“My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,  
and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.  
For you have looked with favor  
upon your lowly servant.

Surely, from now on all generations  
will call me blessed.

For you, the Almighty,  
have done great things for me,  
and holy is your Name.

Your mercy is for those who fear you  
from generation to generation.

You have shown strength with your arm;  
you have scattered the proud in the thoughts of  
their hearts.

You have brought down the powerful from their  
thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

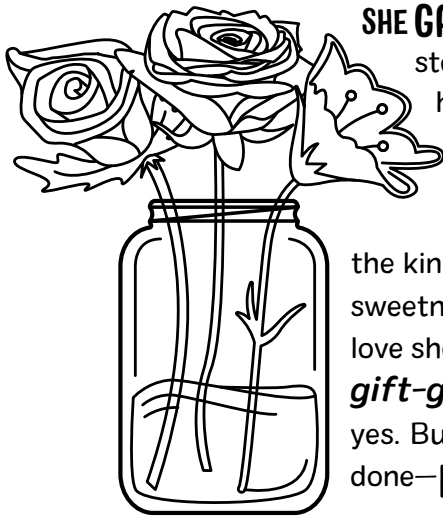
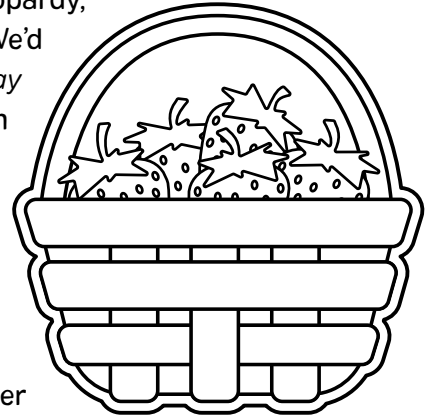
You have filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

You have helped your servant Israel,  
in remembrance of mercy—  
according to the promise you made to our  
ancestors—

to Sarah and Abraham  
and to their descendants forever.”

This translation of Luke 1:46-55 comes from both the  
New Revised Standard Version and The Inclusive Bible.

**M**y friend was so upset. Her father was seriously ill, her job was in jeopardy, and crises in our broader community had her worried and frightened. We'd been walking for a long time—*kept choosing turns that would lead us away from her house*—because she wasn't yet ready to go home and be alone with all that was so hard. But as the evening drew on, we eventually wound our way to her front door. There, waiting for her—delivered sometime while she'd been out walking—was a small jelly jar full of fresh-cut blossoms in a couple of inches of water and a little turquoise basket cradling bright red strawberries.



**SHE GASPED WHEN SHE SAW IT.** And then she sat on her step and held each gift in turn, pulling the flowers to her face to breathe in their fragrance, choosing a plump strawberry on top to pop into her mouth. *She swallowed and sighed deeply.*

There was no card with the flowers or fruit, no indication from where the kindness had come. It was a pure gift. As I watched my friend relax into this sweetness, breathe slower and easier with this reminder that she was held by some love she could not even name, *I thought about how much this unknown gift-giver had brought to my friend's doorstep.* Blossoms and berries, yes. But also surprise, delight, and—in a way our conversation and walk hadn't done—**peace.**

As **ELUSIVE** as peace can sometimes seem,

*as much as we talk about “peace of mind” or read scripture about an intangible, unquantifiable “peace that passes understanding,”*

sometimes **peace** is as real as a daisy in a jar, as berry juice on your tongue.

**Mary knew this** when she sang about the new world, the one she sensed growing inside her, and in her community, as the child in her belly grew. Her people—the Jewish people—lived under Roman occupation, and Roman soldiers kept the “peace” by keeping everyone else under the constant threat of violence. It was an arrangement that harmed all who lived in it. **THE INJUSTICE IN HER COMMUNITY MEANT A DEEP PEACE WASN'T POSSIBLE FOR ANY OF THEM.**

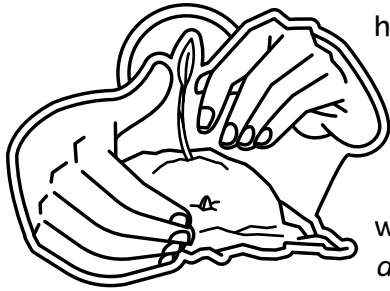
And yet, the new world Mary sings about here isn't elusive or unquantifiable at all.

**The hope she holds onto is one passed on to her from her ancestors: from Hannah, who sang this hymn of reversal and revolution in the Hebrew scriptures, to the Psalmist, who echoed praise to God for raising the poor from the dust and lifting the needy out of their desperation.**

# THE **JUST** AND **LASTING PEACE** THEY ALL SING ABOUT **IS TANGIBLE.**

It is a *concrete change in circumstances.*

It is a *rewriting of people's lived reality.*



To those who have been impoverished and oppressed, it feels like finally having a full belly. To those who have been privileged, **it feels like a rumbling stomach, like a reckoning of all that they've gained at the expense of others.** It feels like laying down the weapons by which that advantage is gained and picking up tools for building a more equitable and beautiful world: *like swinging a hammer, like dipping a paintbrush, like digging in the dirt, dropping in a handful of seeds; like kneading bread.*



We don't know exactly where Mary is when she sings this song. Luke situates it during her visit to Elizabeth, so there's an audience of one, maybe two, if Zechariah is nearby. I like to imagine Mary stepping from their home out into a crowded neighborhood street as she sings, *her words reminding her hearers of those promises from their past, inspiring hope that they have not been forgotten.*

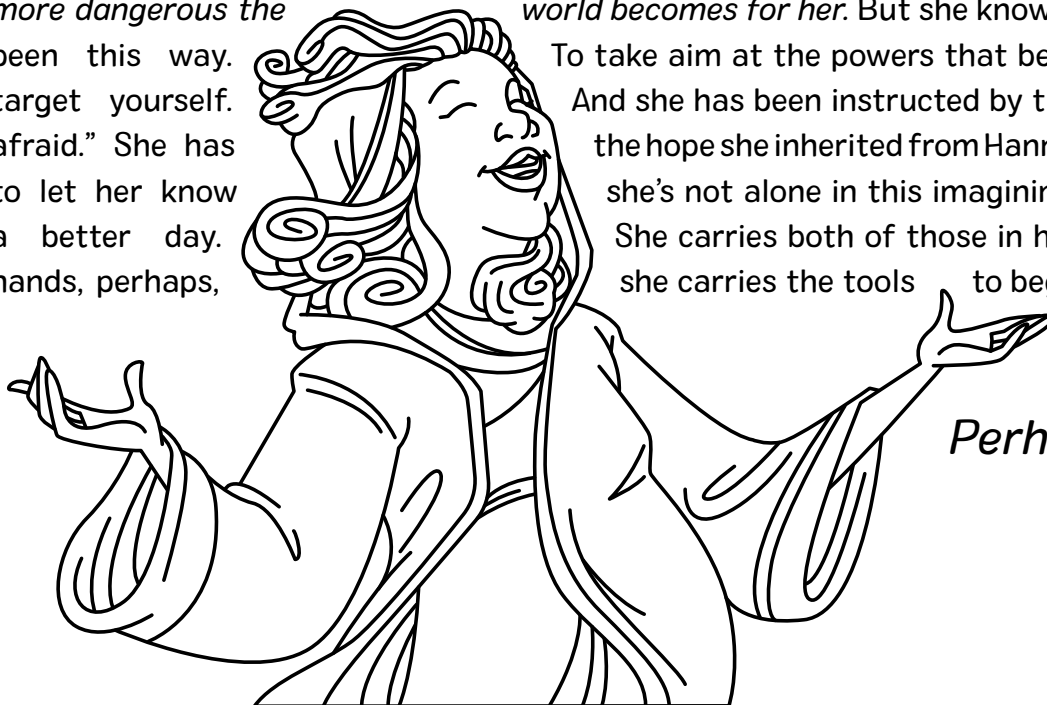


## The more public it is, though, **the more of a threat it becomes.**

*The more Mary's words begin echoing in the streets, the more people start humming along, the more dangerous the world becomes for her.* But she knows this: it has always

been this way. target yourself. afraid." She has to let her know a better day. hands, perhaps,

To take aim at the powers that be means becoming a And she has been instructed by the angel: "Do not be the hope she inherited from Hannah and the Psalmist she's not alone in this imagining, this yearning for She carries both of those in her heart. And in her she carries the tools to begin building a better world.



*Perhaps we all do.*



# QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*What are some tangible things that help bring you peace when you're worried, upset, or frightened?*

*What's a message, value, or dream you've inherited from your ancestors?*

## GOING DEEPER

*How can you tell when people, communities, or countries are not at peace?*

*What are some ways you might bring peace to a loved one or a neighbor? How might you bring peace to a stranger or your community?*

*How might things in your community, your country, or the world need to change in the process of creating a just and lasting peace?*





## TO PRACTICE JOY

### LUKE 2:1-14

**I**n those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom God  
favors!”

# DON'T BE AFRAID!

Can you imagine how **scared** they were?

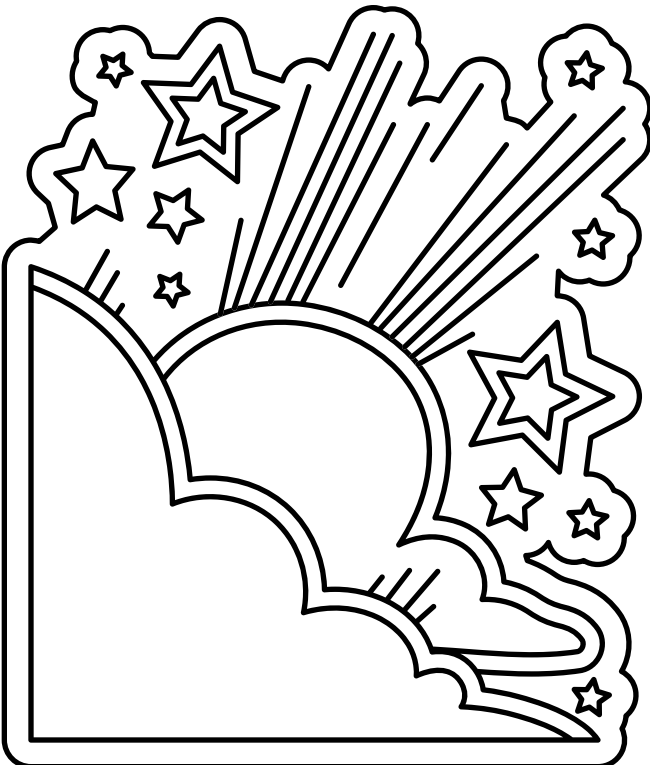
The angel notices how the shepherds are feeling and responds to them with reassurance. Before the angel shares the news—*the news of great joy, the news she'd burst into the sky to share*—she sees how her presence has terrified the shepherds and speaks peace to them.

**“DO NOT BE AFRAID.”**

Then—maybe before they've even had time to hear that first instruction—she rushes in with the news.

**THE ANGEL CAN'T CONTAIN IT ANY LONGER:  
THE LONG-AWAITED MESSIAH IS BORN!**

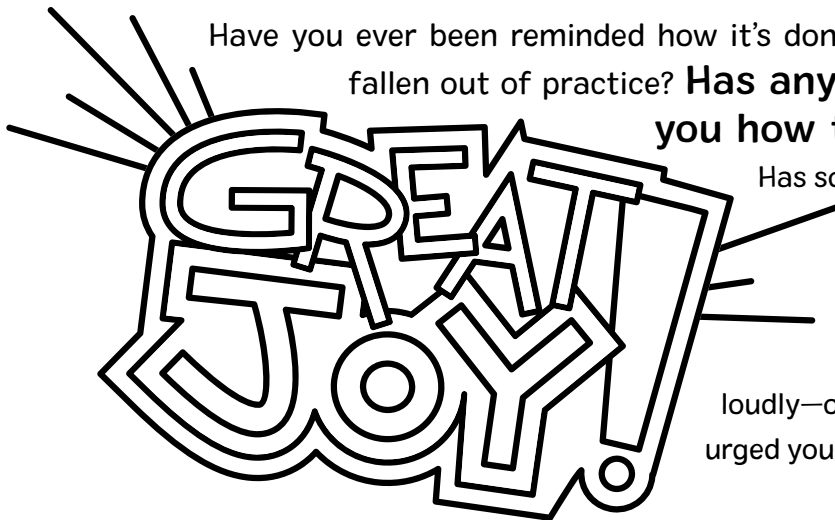
And then—before they've had a chance to digest this incredible announcement—the sky changes again. What had moments ago been silent and dark now roars with sound and flashes with light, a multitude offering praise.



I wonder if the other angels joined with the first angel because the shepherds were frozen where they stood. They'd heard the instruction not to be afraid but hadn't had time to figure out exactly how they should respond. This news was worth rejoicing over, but it's hard to make a move from terror to joy in mere moments. I wonder if this crowd came to surround them, to say,

“Here, this is how it's done: **Spread your arms** wide enough to take in the sky. **Raise your voice** loud enough to echo through the land. **Say thanks to God** for this in-breaking. **REJOICE!**”

And maybe in that moment, the shepherds were reminded: **“Ah, yes. This is how it's done. We've been out of practice.”**



Have you ever been reminded how it's done—this experience of joy—when you've fallen out of practice? **Has anyone ever come along to teach you how to cultivate a practice of joy?**

Has someone taken your hands when you've been working too hard, pulled you up out of your seat at your desk, and danced you around the room, just for fun? Convinced you to eat ice cream for dinner? Sung along loudly—obnoxiously, really—with the car radio and urged you to join in?

At the beginning of each month, my planner's "habit tracker" page invites me to name **six practices I want to cultivate** and fill in a space on a chart for each day that I complete them. I've been trying to include some challenging daily practices (run or swim, send a card, work on my school project), and some self-care (read poetry, take quiet time, go to bed at ten).

When I near the end of the month, my chart is a heavily-spotted display of how often I've completed my practice. There are moments during the month when I look at all the squares filled in and think, **"This is going well! I should challenge myself with something harder."** And then there are moments when I see so many blank squares that I think, **"Next month, I should lower my expectations. I'll see if I can manage to tie my shoes every day."**

When so much in the world feels uncertain or unsafe, when it takes a tremendous amount of emotional energy to navigate each day's difficulties,

**"JOY" CAN SEEM LIKE A LUXURY, A FLEETING GRACE, LIKE SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T BELONG AS PART OF OUR ROUTINE.**

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS THAT YOU CAN CULTIVATE JOY DURING ADVENT?

# BUT COULD WE CULTIVATE A PRACTICE OF JOY?

That's what we do with things that are not yet easy and natural parts of our daily lives: we practice. We practice what's new or challenging for us: piano, soccer, patience. We practice what we might have a knack for but want to get better at: drawing, soup-making, karate. We practice what we're good at and know we'll lose if we don't keep at it: yoga, math, courage.

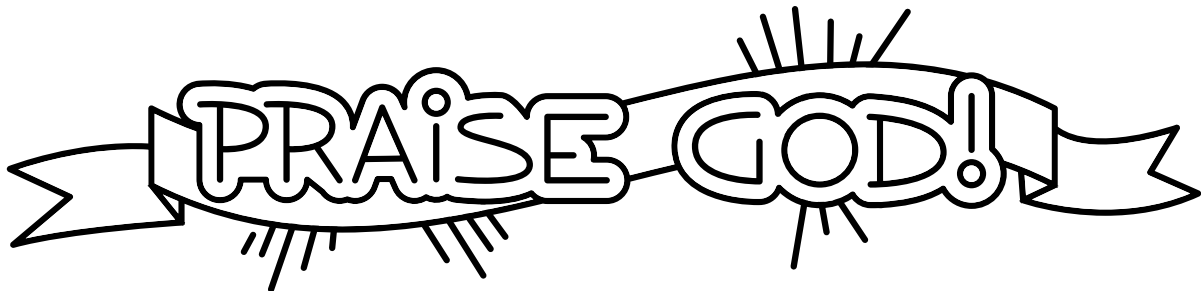
**Could joy fall into that category?**

Could we **PRACTICE DELIGHTING**  
in some piece of **each new day**,  
meeting **each new person** with wonder,  
*treasuring each connection?*

*If joy is not a spontaneous luxury, but a practice, it also becomes a tool we can use to meet challenges. If we can be unafraid of the empty squares on our charts, we can be gracious with ourselves. If we can be unafraid to respond to good news with our whole selves, like the angels showed the shepherds, **we can access God's power within us**. If we can be unafraid to look silly in front of strangers, perhaps we can free them to find their joy, too.*

This Advent, **being intentional about practicing joy** might bring some much-needed lightness and laughter back to our days.

It might help sustain us through the heavier, harder times, too.



## QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*Can you remember when someone noticed how you felt, like the angel does for the shepherds? How did they let you know they noticed?*

*What are some things you practice or would like to start practicing?*

## GOING DEEPER

*What gets in the way of your “practicing joy”?*

*Who might help you develop, or deepen, a practice of joy?*

*Share a story of a time you’ve experienced profound joy.*

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## TO CHOOSE LOVE

### LUKE 2:15-20

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

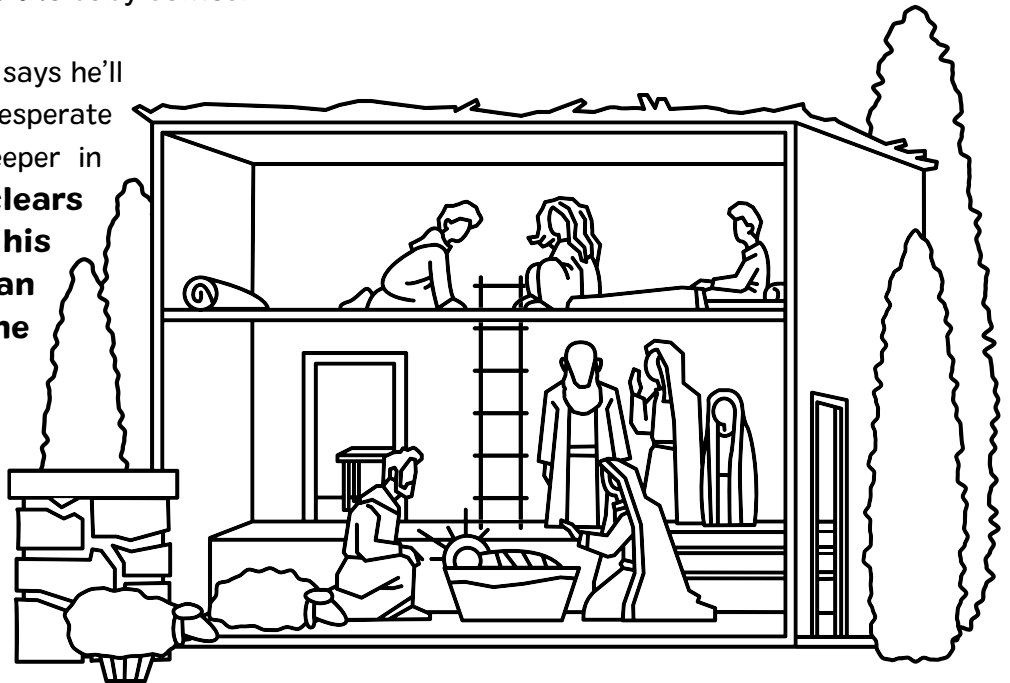
# There is so much **need** in this story.

So much that could go so horribly wrong.

**IMAGINE:** *a woman who's been walking for days*, now far from home and just hours from giving birth to her first child. Her husband, **WIDE-EYED**, is at her side; they're both unsure if they'll find a safe place before the baby comes.

**IMAGINE:** an innkeeper who says he'll figure something out for this desperate couple that every other innkeeper in town has turned away, **who clears some floor space where his animals stay so the woman can labor there among the livestock.**

**IMAGINE:** the shepherds who've just been *shaken awake with the most wondrous news of their lives* and decide to search for a baby they're going to want to call savior and king.



There's so much that could go so wrong in this story, but it doesn't.

At every turn, **THE CHARACTERS CHOOSE LOVE OVER FEAR.**

# There is so much **love** in this story.

**Love comes from Mary and Joseph**, who choose not to be afraid of how their lives have been interrupted and upended, but instead, choose to embrace each other and face this tremendous mystery together. **Love comes from the innkeeper**, who chooses not to be afraid of the strangers begging at his door, but instead to make room where there wasn't any. **Love comes from the shepherds**, who choose not to be afraid of the unknown but choose to set off in search of the startling good news they'd heard from the sky and who, when they find it, share their joy with all they meet.





IN EVERY MOVEMENT OF THE STORY, THE CHARACTERS HAVE A CHOICE.  
**THE STORY HAS ENDURED**  
 THESE MANY CENTURIES AND MADE ITS WAY TO US BECAUSE  
 AT EACH OPPORTUNITY, **THEY CHOSE**  
**LOVE.**

We inherit that story and also that legacy. *Your presence here, and mine, our making it to this day, is a testimony to the love that has been chosen for us, poured into our lives, each day before this one.* We are each a collection of all of the love people have chosen for us along our journey. Coursing through our veins is the same courage that inspired each of those choices. **Every time and every way that we choose love for ourselves and one another, we honor that inheritance.**



A friend shared with me a tip she learned from her recent parenting class: **“Get curious, not furious.”** She wrote it down on a piece of scrap paper and posted it on her refrigerator door. **She said it’s been helpful to have that scribbled reminder;** it stops her before she starts yelling at her kids. She only starts, she says, because her kids don’t listen unless she yells. Often they’re yelling, too.

*But now she’s vowed that instead of raising her voice to be heard over them, her first response will be to “get curious.”*

*Get curious, not furious.*

GETTING CURIOUS STRIKES ME AS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO LOVE EACH OTHER; **ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS OF CHOOSING LOVE OVER FEAR.**

It means we'll ask questions. *We'll pay attention. We'll seek to understand* instead of rushing to judge. *We'll acknowledge* the life, the integrity, the mystery in all things, and approach everyone and all things with respect.

Curiosity about other people's lives, experiences, hopes, struggles, and dreams acknowledges that each person has dignity, worth, and something to teach. Curiosity about our world's health, diversity, vastness, and beauty invites us to discovery, then toward care for creation.

WHAT ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT THIS ADVENT? WRITE AND REFLECT BELOW.

compels us

Curiosity takes us outside of ourselves and opens us up. To be curious is to intentionally take on **vulnerability**, the condition that makes **love** possible.

**I WONDER IF THE INCARNATION IS WHAT GOD DOES WITH GOD'S CURIOSITY ABOUT US.**

I wonder if this Advent story that culminates in **love-come-to-earth**—the **word-made-flesh**—is a story that has its roots in God's deep curiosity about creation.

Perhaps this **ADVENT**,  
our curiosity about each other  
can be one way

**WE CHOOSE LOVE**

for the God that dwells  
within and among us all.

# QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*If you could ask every person you meet one question, what would it be? Why?*

*Is there a mantra like "Get Curious, Not Furious" or a story, or an image, that helps guide and steer you towards love?*

# GOING DEEPER

*What's an ordinary, simple way someone has loved you? And what's an extraordinary, complicated way they've done it?*

*Share a story of a time you've chosen love.*

*Imagine yourself as one of the characters in this story: Mary, Joseph, the innkeeper, or a shepherd. What might that character's process of choosing love over fear have looked like? What factors might have complicated it? What insights can we draw from that ancient choice today?*

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# CHRISTMAS

LUKE 2:20

**T**he shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

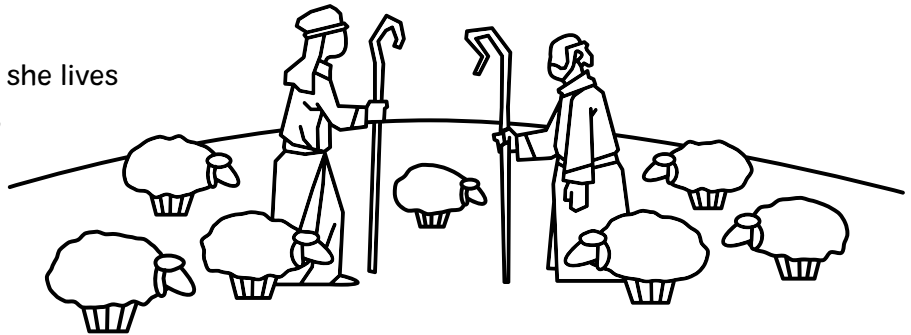
## When the angels visit the shepherds in their fields, the angels' rejoicing fills the sky.

*Their celebration happens as they announce a promise that's come true.* The shepherds leave their stations to the sound of the angels' rejoicing. When they return, the shepherds' own song is what carries them back. *What they have heard and seen pours forth from them as praise.* But I wonder what of the angels' first visit remains with them and how it lives in their memories.



## When the angel first comes to Mary, it's with wildly unbelievable news.

But as Mary's belly grows rounder, as she lives the proof of that announcement, I wonder how her memory of the angelic encounter begins to change. *I wonder if she ever thinks of the angel as the first friend with whom she could celebrate.*



***And I wonder if the angel returned to Mary as Jesus was growing up.*** If she timed her visits for when Mary needed her most, at the crucial junctures in a child's life.

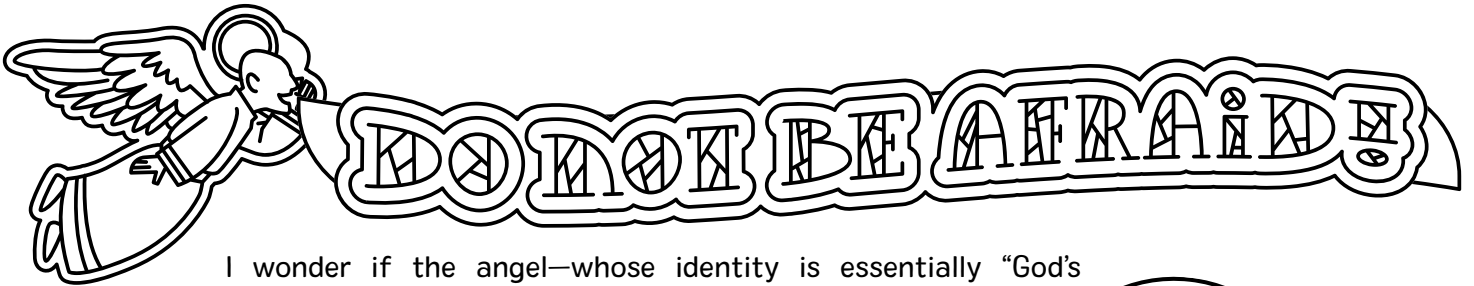
**“Do not be afraid, Mary:** he's teething, and it's painful, but he's okay, and he'll eventually stop screaming.”

**“Do not be afraid:** he's walking and talking now, and he's quicker and more curious than you suspect. He might disappear when you look away, but he won't be gone for long.”

**“Do not be afraid:** I know you feel unprepared for, and overwhelmed by, these adolescent

years. But you are not alone. You do not have to carry all of this by yourself.”

**“Do not be afraid:** he is ready to be on his own. He will always be your baby, but he is also a man now, and the world needs him—and he needs it—in a way he must respond to. There will be times it may feel like you have lost him. But he will forever be yours: a truth that will comfort you and break your heart.”



I wonder if the angel—whose identity is essentially “God’s messenger”—returns in the guise of Elizabeth, who would’ve faced these same struggles just before Mary came to them. Maybe the angel spoke through other parents in the neighborhood who rejoiced with her when Jesus said his first words and commiserated with her when he started to talk back. *Maybe the angel spoke through the rabbis who taught Jesus the stories and songs of his tradition as he grew.*

Or maybe the angel spoke through a stranger who remarked to Mary once, with a knowing smile, that Jesus was *quite a kid*. I wonder if Mary ever saw a shepherd who’d come to town and felt transported back to the night of Jesus’ birth; perhaps her heart warmed to remember those who’d come to keep her company at the very beginning and to welcome her son to the world.

*I wonder if the angel returned to the shepherds after they returned to their pastures.* Maybe as curious neighbors urging them to repeat the story of “all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” Maybe as kids tugging on their sleeves, elders pulling up an extra chair, people all around making space for the shepherds’ tale.

WHO  
ARE THE ANGELS  
IN YOUR LIFE THAT  
BRING GOD’S MESSAGES TO YOU?

“Do not be afraid, shepherds:  
**YOUR STORY IS AN OUTRAGEOUS ONE,**  
but it needs to be told.”

Those “angelic visits” were most likely not as dramatic as their first encounters with the angels.

Still, maybe it was helpful to Mary and the shepherds to notice **God breaking in during the joys and struggles of their more ordinary moments**, too, cloaked in the faces and voices of people they encountered every day. I wonder if we all have those angels that appear throughout our lives in different guises, each time with an urging toward courage and a reminder of God’s goodness.

# I WONDER IF WE ALL MIGHT BE THOSE ANGELS, TO AND FOR EACH OTHER, WHEN WE OFFER EACH OTHER THOSE GIFTS.

Perhaps this Christmas, the angels might come to say to us:

## “Do not be afraid.

There is much to mourn and a great deal to resist.

Do not be afraid. Be careful. Be wise.

**HOLD** out **HOPE** for one another.

Work to **BRING PEACE**—just and lasting peace—to the world.

**PRACTICE JOY** regularly, so you do not lose that muscle.

**CHOOSE LOVE** at every turn, in every way you can.

Do not be afraid.

God is with us in all things, always.

Even now.”

**Absolutely now.**





## QUESTIONS to DISCUSS

*What details do you imagine were part of the shepherds' story of "all they had heard and seen"?*

*Who has been present for you, urging you not to be afraid, right when you needed to hear that most?*

## GOING DEEPER

*What are people in your community fearful of this season?*

*What's one way, without using words, you could encourage people not to be afraid?*

*Where have you found hope, peace, joy, and love, even in the midst of your fear?*



## CONTRIBUTORS

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